

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Smokies Bat Closure

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature

Great Smoky Mountains National Park officials announced the closure of the Whiteoak Sink area effective now through March 31, 2016 to limit human disturbance to bat hibernation sites and help hikers avoid interactions with bats.

Park biologists have reported dramatic declines of cave-dwelling bat populations throughout the park, thought to be due to white-nose syndrome. Infected bats are marked by a white fungal growth on their noses, wings, and tail membrane. The irritation damages skin tissue causing the bats to wake from hibernation. Once aroused, the bats burn energy at a much faster rate depleting stored fat. With no food source available during the winter, the bats soon die.

Park biologists will monitor the important bat site throughout the winter, collecting data that will guide development of a long-term bat-protection plan. An extended closure through late spring may be recommended if the winter data suggests it would increase the chances for survival of a significant number of bats.

The Whiteoak Sink area is primarily accessed from the Schoolhouse Gap Trail between Townsend and Cades Cove. This closure includes the area bounded by Schoolhouse Gap Trail and Turkeypen Ridge Trail west to the park boundary, though those trails will remain open.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.